

# Hermes Leads the Way

## Part 2 of the Series: Alchemy and the Imagination



[This article (part of a four part series) is based upon the draft of a talk delivered to the Bendigo Writers' Council and general public in August 2008 by Dr Ian Irvine entitled 'Alchemy and the Imagination']

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### Author Bio (as at July 2010)

Dr. Ian Irvine is an Australian-based poet/lyricist, writer and non-fiction writer. His work has featured in publications as diverse as *Humanitas* (USA), *The Antigoneish Review* (Canada), *Tears in the Fence* (UK), *Linq* (Australia) and *Takahe* (NZ), among many others. His work has also appeared in two Australian national poetry anthologies: *Best Australian Poems 2005* (Black Ink Books) and *Agenda: 'Australian Edition'*, 2005. He is the author of three books – *Dream-Dust Parasites* a novel (written as Ian Hobson); *The Angel of Luxury and Sadness* a non-fiction book concerned with post-traditional forms of alienation/chronic ennui; and *Facing the Demon of Noontide*, a collection of poetry. Dr. Irvine currently teaches in the Professional Writing and Editing and Community Services programs at BRIT (Bendigo, Australia). He has also taught history and social theory at La Trobe University (Bendigo, Australia) and holds a PhD for his work on creative, normative and dysfunctional forms of alienation and morbid ennui. In his recent theoretical work he has attempted to develop an anti-oppressive approach to creative writing based upon the integration of Cultural-Relational theories concerning 'self in relation' with Jungian and Groffian models of the 'collective' or 'transpersonal' unconscious.

## PART TWO

### **The Archaic Heritage: Hermes-Thoth and Alchemy**

A challenge for all writers, I think, is to maintain an awareness of the deepest motivations behind our writing. If we aren't vigilant we may simply absorb prevalent definitions of what it is to be a writer from our immediate cultural milieu. This discussion concerns the complex relationship between creativity, psycho-spiritual transformation and the writer/artist's attitude toward the 'sentient others' with whom he or she shares this planet. In thinking about the reasons I was first drawn to poetry and fiction back in the mid-1980s I recall that certain writers and thinkers somehow managed to speak directly to my existential state—one of those writer/thinkers was Carl Jung and despite being a psychologist he will figure prominently in this discussion of Alchemy, Hermetica and creativity.

Back in 2003 I wrote a series of poems inspired by my childhood fascination with stamp collecting. Retrospectively I realize that the poems were permeated by the figure of Hermes, both a Greek god and, in alchemy, a kind of archetype for the medieval magician/alchemist (known as Hermes Trismegistus). Many of the poems have been published in all sorts of odd places, and thus I've ended up with rather fond feelings toward the mischief-maker God, 'Hermes'. Back in 2003 I imagined, wrongly as it turned out, that I'd simply write a few amusing little poems about stamps and Hermes before moving on to more serious creative business!

### **Five Imperfect Creative Writer/Poet Archetypes: Dionysus, Orpheus/Apollo, Taliesin, the 'Celebrity Writer' and 'The Bohemian Writer'**

Between 2005 and 2007, after some years coordinating a writing course and thus being exposed on a daily basis to the 'business of writing'—as it is increasingly known these days in contemporary Australia—I experienced something of a vocational crisis. There seemed no point, to me, in continuing as a writer and teacher of writing if I couldn't find a way to regain some of the existential excitement and authenticity of those early encounters with a range of writers, poets, and thinkers—in short, if I couldn't continue to believe in 'the work' (ah there's a term we'll return to repeatedly!), at the very least 'my work', as something more than simply a 'productive', 'self-expressive', 'Social Darwinist' activity to be assessed by the icy, 'invisible hand' of the marketplace. In seeking to exorcise myself of the 'celebrity–Neoliberal' writer archetype, I found myself turning for inspiration to three traditional poet-writer archetypes from the European tradition: Orpheus (whom I also associate with Apollo), Dionysus and Taliesin (a figure beloved of my Celtic ancestors).

The Orphic/Apollonian model of literary activity is understood by scholars to be rational, measured and socially conformist in style, as well as melodic, technically excellent and highly melancholy/sensitive. The Dionysian model, on the other hand, activates the primal instincts: sex, aggression and emotional excess. In the Dionysian worldview we may experience a violent seizure of consciousness by underground (unconscious) forces—pounding, often discordant, music and large quantities of wine (or name your own intoxicant) complete the picture. If the Orphic/Apollonian poetic is sedate and safe (its product pleasing to the ear), the Dionysian poetic is the path to personal mayhem, ruined relationships, Acquired Brain Injury, and, occasionally, premature death. Neither poetic, on its own, has ever sat comfortably with me.

‘Taliesin’, a Welsh poet archetype, has acted as a useful counter to the limitations I perceive in both the Orphic/Apollonian and Dionysian archetypes. I guess the foundational shamanic/animistic elements to the Taliesin story, coupled with a deep acknowledgement in the Celtic polytheistic tradition generally of female creativity by way of stories about powerful female druids, *ovates filidh* and bards appeals to me. On the other hand I’ve often felt Taliesin’s druidic derived poetic to be too remote, too embedded in the polytheistic Celtic past, too New Age these days to allow modern ‘poet/writers’ to deal effectively with the many new problems currently afflicting us—e.g. rampant desacralisation, alienation, globalisation, technocratic authoritarianism, etc..

The other writing archetype that influenced me profoundly as a young person was that of the Modernist/Postmodernist bohemian, *avant gardist* writer. I find the literature that came out of the Symbolist, Imagist, Dada, Surrealist, Expressionist, etc. movements personally inspiring. Likewise, I’ve long admired modernist writers and poets such as Charles Baudelaire, W.B. Yeats, Jean Paul Sartre, George Orwell and Franz Kafka. However, few of these figures (I think Yeats is the exception) seem to me to be connected to archaic literary traditions that outline a personal path for psycho-spiritual transformation (healing?). Similarly, few give us a viable alternative to life inside the Cartesian-Newtonian materialist paradigm that dominates the West today. Transpersonal dimensions of being, however, were explored by the poets and shamans of antiquity and, most importantly for me as an Australasian writer, were believed in by the Maori people I’d come across in New Zealand and many of the Koori people I’ve come to know in Central Victoria. Various personal experiences have thus convinced me that the materialist/scientific paradigm is merely a useful narrative adopted by large numbers of Westerners at a particular point in history—its not the final position on the nature of the universe. Importantly, it seems to me that many contemporary materialist models of the ‘writer/poet’ seem to have been seamlessly absorbed into the ‘Celebrity Writer’ model so beloved of new millennium hyper-capitalism.

Jungian theorizing on creativity is for me a useful bridge between some of the archaic creative archetypes already discussed and a possible effective new millennium poetic that may be worth practicing. It is also a useful modern entry point to the potentially bottomless pit that is the alchemical/ Hermetic tradition. Jung spent four decades of his life attempting to understand alchemy and wrote three full-length books and numerous essays on the subject as it pertained to his theory of the archetypes. During those decades he also used alchemy to develop the key Jungian therapeutic technique of ‘active imagination’, which not only psychologist, but writers and artists, have found inspirational.<sup>1</sup>

According to Jung, a form of active imagination was practiced (was even perfected) by the late-Medieval alchemists. To him their ‘projections’ of unconscious

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<sup>1</sup> Many writers, poets and thinkers, and not just from the medieval period, have used alchemical categories, concepts and symbols in their work. Jung well understood the influence of ‘the Great Work’ on artists and poets down the millennia. In *Psychology and Alchemy*, p.67, trans. R.F.C. Hulls, Princeton/Bollingen Paperbacks 1980, he described Goethe’s classic work, *Faustus*, for example, as ‘an alchemical drama from beginning to end.’ The same could be said of many other medieval and early modern literary classics. We’re interested here in Jung’s reading of the old texts, what he made of them and how his interpretation affected his understanding of the imagination, creativity and the technique of ‘active imagination’.

content onto minerals, liquids and gases, and over long periods of time, suggested a prototype for positive psycho-spiritual transformation. To say, however, that ‘alchemical processes’ are central to Jungian psychology and its take on creativity, is also to say that Hermetic philosophy is central, and if that is so, then the figures of Hermes/Mercury, Thoth and Hermes Trismegistus become preeminent in our attempts to understand the place of creativity in our lives.

The rest of this discussion will be devoted to outlining the main features of the Jungian-Alchemical perspective on creativity. We’ll begin with a brief ‘archaeology’ of the Hermes figure.<sup>2</sup>

### **Archaic Feature of Hermes—the Cardinal Hermetic Qualities**

Both Hermes and Thoth, in their respective traditions, were inventors of writing and protectors of scribes. They were also divine guardians of esoteric knowledge of all descriptions and, as a consequence, archetypal teachers. It is, however, in the figure of Hermes/Mercury that the impulses of the ‘psychologist/shaman’ fuse most seamlessly with the impulses of the ‘writer/poet’. This ancient fusion, goes back, at the very least, to Classical descriptions of Hermes.

Those exhibiting the Hermetic disposition (unlike the Orphic or Dionysian dispositions) can be both healers of imbalances within and between souls and masters of story-telling, poetry and the like. Both faculties can coexist and enrich each other. Jung himself is evidence of this grand and ancient fusion, with his long commitment to both psychology and alchemy, and his life-long interest in art and literature. These days he is certainly known as one of the most creative of psychologists; i.e. one of the most in-tune with the creative imagination. Similarly, a figure such as the German poet Goethe can be seen as the most alchemical, and in modern terms ‘psychological’, of poets!<sup>3</sup>

Karl Kerényi writes eloquently on the complexity of the classical Hermes figure in his book *Hermes: Guide of Souls*. The tradition he uncovers is rich indeed, and this is so despite his leaving to one side the late-Classical Hermetic and Medieval alchemical literature concerning the figures of ‘Hermes Trismegistus’ and ‘Mercurius’. To Kerényi the Greek God Hermes is a fascinating but elusive deity since his *modus operandi* is saturated with qualities these days associated with what Jung called the ‘trickster archetype’. As God of thieves and trickery (though usually in the ultimate best interests of a community or individual) he possesses a charming though self-effacing personality as well as an unnerving capacity to move about as though invisible. He is also the God of travelers and is known as the ‘messenger god’ or divine ‘herald’. Hermes is also a figure of sudden abrupt change, of movement between worlds, specifically between Olympus, the mortal world and Hades. This capacity for psycho-spiritual (and metaphoric) ‘flight’ is famously symbolized by his winged sandals and winged traveler’s hat. This ancient association with thresholds and transitions also landed him the job of divine psychopomp, or leader of recently departed souls as they journeyed to Hades. In the Greek tradition death thus meant an inevitable encounter with Hermes (and his ‘caduceus’ or wand of serpents).

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, the synthesis here outlined represents, but one possibly alternative to the ‘celebrity writer’ syndrome everywhere endemic—I have no doubt that other equally effective models for conducting the work of creativity could be explored.

<sup>3</sup> Baigent and Leigh (1997, Chapt 13) provide a fascinating rollcall of Romantic, Realist, Modernist and even Postmodernist writers either directly (e.g. Goethe, Coleridge, Blake, Flaubert, Yeats, Baudelaire, Joyce, Thomas Mann, Rilke, Patrick White, etc.) or more discretely (Byron, Shelley, Huysmans, Mallarmé, Wilde, Eliot, Virginia Woolfe, Kafka, Hesse, Musil, Borges, Thomas Pynchon, Marquez, etc.) influenced by alchemical/hermetic traditions.

He was also the god of good cheer, communality, fulfilled male domesticity, wealth and successful trade. In this sense he was often depicted as a friendly fellow, almost like a close male friend. This is how he manifests in Homer's *Odyssey* where he helps Odysseus ward off the seductions of the Goddess Circe by gifting him a magic potion.

The 'caduceus', or wand of entwined snakes (some say representing illness and recuperation), that Hermes is often depicted carrying, was also associated with Asclepius, the Greek healer God. Its origins as a symbol perhaps date to the ancient Mesopotamian civilization of the Near-East. It has been argued that as archetypal 'magician', and as a key figure in many classical (and later) mystery traditions, Hermes presided over psycho-spiritual healing whereas Asclepius was more of a physician in our sense, i.e. presiding over bodily ailments. We must remember, however, that much ancient psychiatry had strong magical and mythopoetic sub-currents and that in the ancient world many physical ailments were interpreted along spiritual lines. It is this element to Hermes, mediated through the alchemical figure 'Mercurious', that Jung instinctively picked up on in his attempts to ground 'Archetypal Psychology' in ancient psycho-spiritual traditions.

Four aspects of the classical Hermes are worth re-emphasizing with regard to their importance to modern writers and artists: 1) his association with the invention of writing and thus his close association with the craft of writing and thus with writers; 2) his association with music (interestingly it is a particularly embodied, sexual and 'shameless' kind of music that he creates<sup>4</sup>) via the magical tortoise shell he purportedly gave, in the form of a lyre, to Apollo ['Hermes was the first/ to manufacture songs/ from the turtle he encountered ...']<sup>5</sup>; 3) his profound association with esoteric knowledge and magic of all descriptions; and 4) his association with three bee, or fate, goddesses, who 'prophesied' (sang like muses) when drunk on honey. Nor Hall, in discussing their relationship to creativity, writes: 'These three fabled sisters whose ancient heads come up withered from pollen-filled flowers, are responsible for both poetic inspiration and madness'. In further discussing the 'Thriai', Hall informs us:

One represents madness, another clarity, and the third the brink, the place or phenomena of reversal ... things turn into their opposites.<sup>6</sup>

Hekate—with whom Hermes had many things in common—was said to have given similar gifts to the young Hermes. Like the Bee-Goddesses, he is often depicted as three-headed. The associations between poetic madness (for good or ill), the three female fates, and Hermes as 'ruler of dreams' (*hegetor oneiron*) has been noted by modern scholars of the imagination, as well as by depth psychologists.

### **From *Hermes Trismegistus* to the Mercury of Alchemy**

There are many differences between the classical Hermes (who was perceived as a God) and the mysterious, though more or less human, figure of Hermes Trismegistus, legendary founder of Hermetic philosophy and the author of the 'Emerald Tablet'—a key text in the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Many sections of the *Corpus* are believed to date back to at least the first century CE, perhaps earlier, though in Medieval times, they were believed to be older still, going back to Egyptian sources that preceded the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. Apart from the deity/human divide, the other obvious

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<sup>4</sup> See the *Hymn to Hermes*.

<sup>5</sup> From the *Hymn to Hermes*, as translated and discussed in Kerenyi, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Hall, Nor. p.215.

difference between the two figures is that the Hermes Trismegistus of the *Corpus* comes across as an early adherent of a kind of pagan monotheism<sup>7</sup>—indeed Burckhardt notes that the Hermes of the *Corpus* believes in the ‘the transcendent principle of the intellect’<sup>8</sup>. At times this Hermes ‘thrice great’ appeared to initiates as absurd, at other times he seemed sublime. Hermes as deity, however, is by definition an invention of the polytheistic Greek mind. A blurring of the lines was inevitable, and thus no matter how much the Church fathers of the Medieval period attempted to see the Hermetic writings (like the writings of Plato), and this Hermes Trismegistus, as ‘pre-Christian seeds of the Logos’<sup>9</sup> the earlier figure of Hermes/Mercury was ever in danger of running the show—as is evidenced by the Medieval fondness for blurring the lines, pictorially speaking, between Hermes as polytheistic god and Hermes Trismegistus. This tendency is particularly evident, as we would expect, in the alchemical images and texts of the Renaissance and Early Modern periods—i.e. periods when church hegemony was threatened by firstly Humanism and later, Science.

This tension between monotheistic, or at least monist, tendencies (though according to Walter Scott the books of the *Corpus* in no sense outline a Judo-Christian monotheism) and polytheistic tendencies shadows the entire Western Hermetical-Alchemical tradition, right through even to the twentieth century. Indeed, one can sense it in Jung’s Archetypal Psychology, given many of its constructs are in dialogue with Renaissance and Early Modern alchemical texts. Some see Jung’s theories as a modern day recapitulation of polytheistic, even animistic, cosmologies, and there is some truth in the argument. Just how much of this tendency comes from late Medieval alchemy is debatable.

Hermes, however, was intent on further shape-shifting! The ‘Mercurius’ of Medieval alchemy is not quite Hermes Trismegistus, nor is he Hermes the deity, rather he is best understood as a kind of ‘spirit of transformation’. In this sense he (though in many respects s/he might be a better designation given his gender shape-shifting abilities and associations with the original hermaphroditic creation) is said to be the beginning, the middle and the end of the ‘Great Work’ – in short an arch-daimon in whom the dualisms and contradictions of everyday existence were somehow resolved. Some alchemists also saw Mercurius as a personification of the Imagination. There is no doubt that elements of Hermetic philosophy were central to alchemy (the figure of the hermaphrodite for example), but the alchemical obsession with the elements, the planets, and of course the physical processes involved in transforming the *prima materia*, base metals and so on, grounded alchemical activities in ‘Nature’ to such a degree that the more transcendental aspects of Hermetic philosophy often subsumed under a philosophy of immanence, that eventually helped birth scientific materialism.

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<sup>7</sup> This is most obviously confirmed by the Hermetic creation myth outlined in ‘Libellvs 1’ of the *Corpus* (trans. in Walter Scott, *Hermetica*, p.117-125)—it is a very long way from the foundation polytheistic Greek creation myths we find in Homer, Hesiod, etc. In the Hermetic myth God, the ‘Original Mind’, is described as bisexual and gives birth to a second mind, a ‘Maker of things’ who in turn creates ‘Seven Administrators’ i.e. the Seven Planets, who of course at that time were associated with the classical Gods. Another female figure, Nature, who is described as ‘bereft of reason’, also figures prominently in the Creation process in that she falls in love with a creation of the Original Mind, i.e. man, and in a standard patriarchal trope, ‘man’ is seduced by, in this case, ‘Nature void of reason’ such that he becomes tangled in ‘matter’, ever-after a tragic dual being, partly of the immortal realm, partly of the realm of matter. Interestingly, however, the figure of Nature also creates ‘Seven [bisexual humans] according to the characters of the [Seven Planets]’ Immediately after their creation, however, these creatures are split apart into male and female by the Original Mind’s will—in short a second fall, the first being the seduction of man by Nature.

<sup>8</sup> Burckhardt, T. *Alchemy*, p.37.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.37.

## Summary (Parts 1 & 2): Alchemy, Hermes and Creativity

It is worth pausing for a moment and summarising the link between the figure of Hermes and the ancient art/science of alchemy introduced in Part 1 of this series. We can say that the alchemical overcoming of the spirit versus body conflict (or dualism) derives its impetus from a tension between the pagan polytheistic figure of Hermes (and, through him, pagan European traditions generally) and the more transcendental tendencies expressed in the Hermetic literature. Hermes could move between the various worlds and states of being/manifestation, could dissolve psychic and spiritual impasses and impurities. For our purposes, Jung read the alchemical quest in terms of a psycho-spiritual journey aimed at confronting (not putting off or transcending)—through personal alchemical transmutations—the more destructive, inferior aspects of the individual's psychic inheritance (i.e. to Jung there is a confrontation with 'the Shadow' which in alchemy was symbolized by 'mortification'—a sub-stage of the *Nigredo*).<sup>10</sup> This commitment to a spirituality of immanence, to attaining the fullest possible manifestation of being in a particular lived existence, is arguably the foundation of the medieval spiritual Alchemy.

Part Three of this series will look more specifically at the influence on Jung of both Alchemy and Hermetic and Gnostic thinking in the development of his idea of 'Active Imagination' a unique way of looking at and approaching creativity of use to almost any creative artist today.

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<sup>10</sup> Known elsewhere, for example in Christian mysticism, as the *via negativa*.

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